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ABSTRACT

This article presents relevant information about Arab American children as a guide for multicultural teachers. Given the alarming impact of cultural conditioning in American society, the previously invisible Arab Americans and their children have become visible in a negative way. Current cultural conditioning does not allow Arabs to see themselves positively, and it does not allow other Americans to see Arabs as they wish to be seen. Causes and effects of the identity crisis of the Arabic-speaking child are reviewed, and information from studies investigating Arab children's experiences in American schools is used to help teachers foster a more positive learning and teaching environment in culturally diverse classrooms to empower Arab children. Conditions of effective learning must be present to enhance motivation, promote tolerance, reduce prejudice, and multiply learning opportunities for all students. Understanding invisible Arab children is a key element in promoting their self-esteem and the desired educational outcomes. (Contains 39 references.) (SLD)

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Educating the Arab American Child: Implications for Teachers

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Abstract

Given the alarming impact of cultural conditioning in the American society, the invisible Arab Americans and their children have become more visible in a negative way. Thus, the current cultural conditioning does not allow Arabs to see themselves positively because of the way Americans see them. At the same time, it does it allow Americans to see Arabs the way Arabs truly see themselves. This paper examines the causes and effects of the "identity crisis" in terms of the negative impact the cultural conditioning has on the self-image of the Arabic speaking child. Based on an ethnographic study investigating the experiences of Arabic speaking students in American schools, the findings and their implications for teaching are presented. This article presents relevant information about the Arab American children and their families as a guide for multicultural teachers. The discussion focuses on fostering a more positive learning/teaching environment in the culturally diverse classroom to empower the Arab American child. Implications on how to invite trust, develop empathy, reduce prejudice, and empower the Arab minority child through the social harmonizing process are presented.

The sizable portion of the Arabic speaking students in the American educational institutions requires educators to learn more about this group. Educators must create an environment conducive to the academic, social, psychological, linguistic, and cultural growth of these participants in the democratic educational system. Fallacious assumptions caused by cultural conditioning about the Arabic speaking students will impede their success and active participation in the multicultural society. Conditions of effective learning must be present to enhance motivation, promote tolerance, reduce prejudice, and multiply learning opportunities for all students. The understanding of the invisible Arab children is a key element in promoting positive self-esteem and achieving desired educational outcomes.

Educating the Arab American Child: Implications for Teachers

Introduction

With the increasing trends in social instability in some parts across the globe, the need to understand the implications of these events and how they affect the minority children in the microcosm of today's classrooms is significant. In particular, the external influences in the universal culture have significantly affected the image of Arab Americans and their children.

The unstable Middle East has caused many people living in this region of the world to seek refuge and stability elsewhere. No doubt, great numbers of immigrants and refugees throughout the Middle East have joined an already large and vibrant Arabic-speaking community in the United States of America.

Although Arab Americans are less visible than other minorities, the anti-Arab perception in the media makes them more visible in a negative way. The current cultural conditioning does not allow Arabs in America to see themselves positively because of the way Americans see them. At the same time, it does it allow Americans to see Arabs the way Arabs truly see themselves. Based on an ethnographic study investigating the experiences of Arabic speaking students in American schools, the findings and their implications for teaching are presented. This article also presents observations on the ways in which social conditioning has shaped the evolution of scapegoating, stereotyping and prejudice, and how it has affected intercultural relations in the American public schools. This paper examines the causes and effects of the "identity crisis" in terms of the negative impact the cultural conditioning has on the self-image of the Arabic speaking child. Finally, the discussion focuses on fostering a more positive learning/teaching environment in the culturally diverse classroom. Implications on how to invite trust, develop empathy, reduce prejudice, and empower the Arab minority child through the social harmonizing process are presented.

First, it is worthwhile to present some background information bout the Arab populations that might help teachers become more sensitive to the specific needs of each student form Arab cultural backgrounds. To better understand the Arab minority children, teachers should have a minimum knowledge about the background of the their students (Adeeb& Smith, 1995; Al-Ani, 1995; Al-Batal, 1988; Elkholy, 1976; Khouri, 1990; Nieto, 1996; Peretz, 1981; Sawaie & Fishman, 1985; Storti, 1989; Stover,1983; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983).

Background Information About Arabs

Not only accurate information about Arabs is scare, but, if found, it is not free of bias and stereotypes. Also, available information about Arabs does not largely reflect the sociocultural differences and the heterogeneity of the Arabs. These along with other factors will mislead the public about who the Arabs are, what contributions they have made to humanity, and what interactions they have with their fellow humans. Although the following list not of some of the blueprints about the Arabs and their cultures is not conclusive, it may help teachers understand some of the issues in different educational settings.

* There are about 200 million Arabs living in 22 Arab countries (in southwestern Asia and North Africa) extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf.
* The Arab territories are heterogeneous in climate, resources, and demographics.
* Arabs belong to the Semitic race which originally lived in the Arabian Peninsula.
* There are inaccurate definitions of who an Arab is. Not all Arabs are Muslims; there are Arab Christians and Jews (about 20% of the

Muslims are Arabs, and about 5% of the Arabs are Christians). Furthermore, Turks and Iranians, although mostly Muslims, are not Arabs.

* Not everyone living in the Arab World is an Arab; there are other ethnic and racial groups such as Kurds, Druze, Copts, Assyrians, Armenians, Blacks, Berbers, Kildanis, and the like.
* The Arab World encompasses an array of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious groups. The Arab macroculture is pluralistic in nature and is increasingly multicultural.
* The Arab microcultures flourished within a seemingly democratic framework. Historically, the macroculture of the Arab World was marked by a dynamic balance between unity and pluralism during which time the microcultures flourished in an ambiance of harmony and coexistence.
* The Arab value system centers around the family. Arabs are family-oriented where both males and females are highly valued with a great sense of pride in individuals, families, communities, and society at large.
* Religion and language are among the most important identifying traits of individuals and communities among Arabs. Islam, intricately related to Judaism and Christianity, is seen as a way of life, a means of cultural and social growth, a political and economic paradigm of behavior at individual and group levels.
* The Arabic speaking peoples are *dilingual* due to the diglossic situation in Arabic; two functional forms of the language are equally important in meeting the communicative needs of their speakers.
* The Arabic language, once a lingua franca, has a religious prestige because it is the language God chose to reveal the Quran (Kura'an) to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Quranic (Classical, or High) Arabic is the language

of the mosque, media, and education. It is the language that is supposed to be used by the elite educated Arabs.

* Quranic literacy is widely common among hundreds of millions of Muslim non-Arabs across the globe. About one billion Muslims know Arabic.
* Arab Muslim civilizations flourished throughout history; their empire spread from Spain and Europe to China. Arabs have largely contributed to world civilizations in nearly all aspects.
* Foreign/second language learning is highly valued by Arabs and Muslims. Multilingualism is viewed as a social and religious asset, not a liability.
* Arab and Muslim Americans are among the largest ethnic groups in the United States.

According to Banks (1994), one of the most fundamental dimensions of multicultural education is the knowledge construction process. It relates to "the extent to which teachers help students to understand, investigate and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspective, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it" (p. 5). This dimension is also important because it intricately relates to other dimensions such as reducing prejudice, empowering the school culture and social structure, equity pedagogy, and content integration. A dynamic balance between these dimensions is necessary to empower all students from diverse, racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, understanding students' characteristics, feelings, attitudes, and experiences can help teachers and educators both students and teachers develop more democratic values and attitudes and become more active participants in the pluralistic society (Banks, 1995; Bennett, 1995; Grant, 1995; Nieto, 1996).

As far as Arab minority groups are concerned, they represent diverse backgrounds. One of the most important factors has to do with the Arab society; it is diverse in nature despite the common cultural and linguistic traits that are found in various Arab societies.

This diversity constitutes a bridge to understand different cultures and learn about them. This diversity stems from geographic, ethnic, religious, political and socio-economic factors that are found throughout the Arab world. In fact, Arabic-speaking students in the American public schools represent a variety of sociocultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and their educational expectations and attitudes reflect these numerous differences (Yorkey, 1977).

However, some of these groups have assimilated in the American way of life, while others are trying to maintain a meaningful level of multiculturalism (Grant, 1995). Still, others have developed resentment to the sociocultural adjustment process due to the alienation and a sense on non-belonging in the American society (Bennett, 1995; Grant, 1995). In other words, most Arab Americans feel that they are deprived of their full participation in the democratic process (Nieto, 1996).

Although there are many factors that shape the Arab American experience which influence the educational needs of their chilren, the Arab American children have become invisible in the American educational system.

The Invisible Immigrants

Although the history of the Arab emigrations to America is an old one, these waves have been less noticeable. The contemporary state of the Arab countries has been brought about in the wake of the colonization era that resulted in divisions in political entities. As a result of the Western intervention, the bridge between ethnic, religious and racial groups has widened (Goldfield, 1990). This resulted in a less stable Arab world and prompted several immigration waves the Americas. For instance, early Arabic-speaking immigrants arrived to the United States in the early 1900's from Syria and Lebanon, the most troubled of all (Sawaie & Fishman, 1985). Another immigration wave, as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began as early as the 1930's. Since then other migrations from places such as Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq took place as people sought greater professional and economic opportunities in America. Other reasons, that may have influenced Arabic-speaking people to come to the United States may be dictated by political instability in their countries. Thus, these reasons involve finding an opportunity to get away from the discrimination to which they are subjected by their government, and an opportunity to get away from family and social pressures (Rao, 1979).

Speaking of the immigration patterns and the characteristics of the invisible Arab Americans, Nieto (1996) writes, ". . . Although many have indeed come under these circumstances in the recent past, their numbers have not been conspicuous. Consequently their immigration to this country has been a relatively quiet one, given scant attention by the media" (p.137). At the same time, Nieto acknowledges the astonishing lack of information about this particular group. In fact, the literature that provides an objective and comprehensive account about the Arab Americans is almost missing.

In addition, Arabs have been dynamic in the process of the multiculturation process within the U.S. overarching framework of democracy. Historically, they interacted with different cultures in a pluralistic manner. The diversity of the Arab cultures, societies and languages, provides an ample testimony on how Arabs can be active participants of the

global society. Thus, most Arabs-- given the pretext of their motivation to immigrate-- can easily adjust linguistically, socially, and psychologically. Overall, unlike many minority groups, Arab immigrants have made a "smooth transition" into the American society. Similarly, the Arab children "have not faced massive failure in schools, as is true with other groups," so "they have not been the target of study or research as others have" (Nieto, 1996, p. 137).

It is worth mentioning that there are many reasons why Arab American children tend to be more successful in schools. First, most of these children come from "voluntary immigrant" families who originally came to the U.S. to obtain education. In fact, a large portion of Arab American immigrants came to obtain a degree, so their children come from an educated family backgrounds and that has contributed to their success in schools. Second, the Arab family stresses the value of education and sees it as an essential part of the social growth of their children. Since parents see education as a catalyst for their children and their future (Elkholy, 1976), they always encourge them to get education for education's sake rather than only for utilitarian purposes.

Most importantly, Arabs do not share some of the traits that make other minorities more visible. Generally speaking, Arab Americans are less "racially visible" than other minorities as Asians or Blacks. Thus, they are "much more apt to 'blend in' with the European American population," while keeping their distinctive cultural traits (Nieto, 1992, p. 137).

According to Schaefer (1990, pp. 7-8) there are five properties that distinguish a minority or subordinate group from the dominant one: visible physical or cultural characteristics, involuntary membership, in-group marriage, awareness of subordination, and unequal treatment, and experience of prejudice. While Arab Americans tend to be physically less visible, they share with other minorities the involuntary membership, their consciousness of being subordinated, prejudiced and discriminated against. Although in-group marriage is the norm, Arabs have no restrictions that prohibit interracial marriage.

This is especially true of many Arab American males who married outside their groups and whose children have assimilated in the American society.

The most striking trait of Arabs as an invisible minority group is their unequal treatment and their experiences of a unique type of prejudice and discrimination. Ironically, these properties make them more visible in a negative way in the American society. On the other hand, while Arab American students have largely been successful in the American educational system, contemporary cultural conditioning and historical precedent of misinformation forewarn that we should expect them to be jeopardized in their social and academic growth in the multicultural society.

This will be discussed in terms of the social and cultural conditioning that makes them powerless in the American society.

The Social and Cultural Conditioning and the Arabs

Sharpe (1992) points out that the behavior of the government, of the media, and of social institutions in the American democracy, for a very long time, is bound by cultural conditioning which promotes an individualist culture with disadvantages. Nonetheless, rather than promote stereotypes, the "best advancement is to learn all we can about other cultures and impart it to our students and fellow practitioners. It allows us to more clearly see ourselves as others see us" (Sharpe, 1992, p.107). In short, we need to make accurate educated assessments about the behavior of individuals, groups , and institutions to "facilitate change that truly contributes to the social harmonizing process for the benefit of the global society" (Sharpe, 1992, p.107).

Undoubtedly, the media plays a significant role in enhancing stereotypes. These negative perceptions and attitudes are the outcome of the individuals' personal experiences, parental influence, social ingredients, and the mass media, all of which help to shape the attitudes of the individuals and groups (Gardner, 1982, 1988, 1991; Oskamp, 1977; Reynolds, 1991). According to Anderson, "In the United States, anti-Arab propaganda is a hot commercial item . . . and the media have done their part to encourage Arab-bashing" (p. 29). This over the years has made the Arabs more visible in a negative way. Negative images of Arabs have been incubated in the minds of the public and brought in into today's classrooms. So whenever external incidents take place, the Arabs seem to be the most vulnerable to blame. Abourezk (1993) demonstrated how Arab-Americans and their children lose their civil rights due to the social climate in the American society; according to him, "Arabs are America's new scapegoats, and anti-Arab hysteria has been building in this country for many years" (p. 26). Abourezk cited several incidents that reflect the behavior of the agents of the American governmental and social institutions in their intimidation of Americans of Arab descent.

For a long time the Arabs have been plunged into the realm of stereotyping and victimization (Adeeb & Smith, 1995; Al-Ani, 1995; Nieto, 1996; Santos & Suleiman, 199;

Suleiman, 1993; Zogby, 1981). This over the years, this has resulted in misinformation about the merits of the Arabic culture and its contributions to humanity, let alone celebrating the diversity of Arab cultures in the increasingly pluralistic American society. Thus, cultural conditioning marked with a great deal of *errorism* about the Arab societies has negatively affected the image of Arabic speaking children among their peers and their image of themselves. Consequently, the Arab minority child, according to Nieto (1996), is "one of the most misunderstood, shrouded in mystery and consequently stereotypes" (p.137). Part of the problem is the lack of accurate information and unbiased resources about the Arabs. Another reason lies in the lack of a true representation in the media that gives fair credit to the Arabs and their cultures.

In addition, the role of schools in the American educational system has been less effective in reducing stereotypical images about Arabs. The learners whose cultures are not acknowledged in schools feel alienated. Furthermore students feel that whatever the school does not teach is not worth learning. Since the Arab culture in the American public schools is "referred to in only negative ways" (Nieto 1996, p. 137), "all students are miseducated to the extent that they receive only a partial and biased education. The primary victims of biased education are those who are invisible in the curriculum" (p. 213). Thus, if contributions of a given group are not highlighted in the school curriculum, students will receive conflicting messages about who they are and what their roles should be. And if a group of learners are portrayed negatively in the culture of the school, then an "identity crisis" will be inevitable. These meanings have been echoed in the experiences of many Arabic speaking students going to American educational institutions even at the university level (Suleiman, 1993).

Therefore, foundation and methodology in a multiculturally infused program should address "information on the contributions of diverse people to the various disciplines" (Chisholm, 1994, pp. 57-58).Unfortunately, the Arab civilization, which has largely contributed to humanity in almost every aspect of world civilization (Al-Qazzaz et al,

1978), has largely been ignored by the American educational institutions and their educational programs. In an account of the lack of serious efforts to acknowledge and "celebrate" the Arabic language and culture in the public schools, colleges, and universities, Starr (1991) demonstrates how America failed to be sensitive to the Arab language and culture in these educational institutions; he also revealed its (i.e. America's) "provincial" trend in dealing with other cultures and languages. Although, "Arabic is the language of one of the world's great civilizations, and one to which the West has been profoundly indebted for over a millennium in fields as diverse as mathematics, chemistry, geography, and philosophy" (Starr, 1991, p. B2), no profound commitment to multiculturalism in the curriculum has been made.

Despite the contact Arabs have with Americans, it has been found that indirect contact with the Americans has little impact on promoting stereotypes (Kamal & Maruyama, 1990). At the same time, with more contact with the Americans, Arabs tend to develop more attitudes because of the way they are viewed by Americans (Suleiman, 1993). In fact, the most frequent contact Americans have with the Arabs and their countries is through media channels. This clearly reflects the role of the media in the cultural and social conditioning process.

Arabic speaking students have had, and continue to have, their share of discrimination due to the cultural conditioning. Numerous reports document cases of Arab American students at different levels have being harassed by their peers in times of political fluctuations. While the American public has become conditioned to accept these stereotypes, educators can paly a significant role in the social harmonization process in the school culture and in the society at large. In particular, bilingual/multicultrual teachers have the power to thwart cutural conditioning from taking its toll. After all, students are the ultimate consumers of teachers' input, and the overall educational services provided by the school system: cultivating a more positive cutural conditioning is a key ingerdient for

providing the best education for all, and the empowerment of individuals and groups in the social unit.

Finally, educators dealing with Arabic speaking students need to be sensitive to the unique backgrounds of this particular group. Teachers need to listen to the students and their families and avoid making hasty assumptions about their linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Unless teachers and schools harness and build on the values brought in to the classroom, minority students will continue to be deprived of the basic components of their pride and success, and to be held captives in the classrooms.

Arabic Speaking Students' Attitudes Toward Americans

One of the most important determiners of effective teaching of Arabic speaking students is maintaining a positive attitude about the Arabs and their culture. In addition to understanding how Arab Americans are viewed, it is important to understand Arabs' perceptions of Americans.

Affective characteristics of the minority learner, such as attitudes toward the dominant group, have a marked effect on the learning/teaching and interactional processes in diverse settings (Lustig & Koester, 1996; Seelye, 1993). For instance, affective predispositions (i.e. the learner's beliefs, feelings, and intentions) towards the target language community are likely to explain a proportion of language achievement (Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp, & Chatow, 1990). These affective variables deal with the social/political contexts from which attitudes and motivation are derived (Gardner, 1982b).

Attitude formation, according to Brown (1987, p. 126), develops in the early stages of one's life and is the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, and "contact with people who are 'different' in any number of ways, and interacting affective factors in the human experience". On the other hand, students whose experiences are unpleasant with English or its speakers tend to have unfavorable attitudes towards the host country and its language (DuBois, 1956). This is true of the Arab minority students who develop certain types of attitudes, negative or positive, towards English and the American people.

These issues have been largely overlooked by researchers who have worked with the Arabic-speaking students.

Arab attitudes toward the Americans and the U.S. are shaped in terms of various determiners. There are several factors that shape cross-cultural attitudes in this regard: (1) the individual's previous and current perceptions about the target group; (2) individual's experiences with the group in the host country; and (3) the media and its roles in enhancing positive and negative stereotypes. In a large scale study conducted on Arab university students, Suleiman (1993) concludes that Arab attitudes vary in terms of these determiners.

For instance, the negative portrayal of Arabs in the American media negatively affects the attitudes of Arabs towards Americans. Likewise, an Arab who has several unpleasant experiences with Americans tend to have unfavorable attitudes toward Americans.

In order to ease the adjustment of Arabic speaking students and cultivate more positive attitudes in the American school system, the following guidelines must be kept in mind. These guidelines should be implemented whether in the delivery of input or in the interactional process in various social and educational settings. Teachers and school administrators should be held accountable to create conditions that are conducive to the expectations of Arabic speaking children and their parents. These desired goals can be achieved through:

1. Awareness combined with mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural differences;
2. Frequent direct contact with the target group would always make oneself understood and comfortable, not to mention the improvement of one's command of the language;
3. ESL teaching/learning approaches should NOT be disconnected from the teaching of cultural aspects of that language;
4. Bilingual/ESL programs should enhance the notion of intercultural communication as a requisite for development;
5. Multicultural programs ought to be based on the needs assessment of students;
6. teachers and educators dealing with Arab students should be sensitive to their needs and characteristics.

Conclusion

Given the alarming cultural conditioning aimed to foster negative stereotypes about the Arab cultures and peoples, multicultural education teachers should maintain a positive outlook and a meaningful interaction with Arabic speaking students in the American schools. By understanding the microcultures of this particular groups, teachers will promote a greater understanding of the dynamics of the macroculture of the pluralistic society. This will enhance their ability to deal with real-life issues and maintain peace in the democratic classroom.

This paper has attempted to provide a microsociological account of some important cultural information about Arabic-speakers which, hopefully, will assist teachers to have a point of departure from which to understand their students and their families. By providing relevant cultural information, teachers can better determine how to structure the curriculum to include these students in every as aspect of the school's life. Similarly, positive cross-cultural attitudes can help Arabic speaking students process of multiculturation in the pluralistic society.

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